



TN

#4
JUN



W I L D S T O R M . C O M



Once a year a secret society, dating back as far as recorded history, meets here, at Imperial Grove.

These are the true rulers of our world, in many ways.

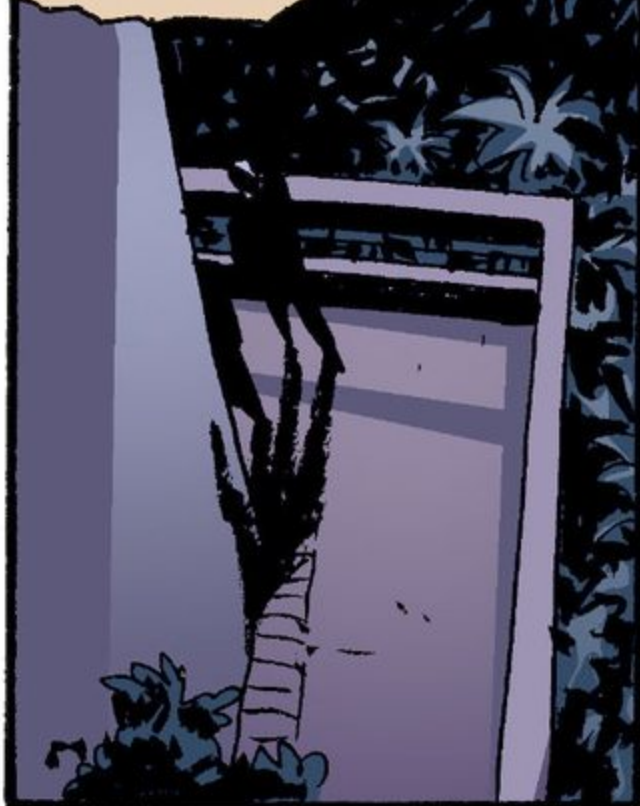


A hidden monarchy based on power and greed...

...Bending the world behind a shroud of lies and illusion.



For people like me, who've been on the inside of governmental Black Ops, it's no surprise that our leaders are rarely worthy of trust...



...But to have the veil completely removed, to actually shake the unseen hand...



...It just somehow
doesn't seem real.

Yet here I am, on my way
to kill one of the most
powerful puppet-masters
in the world.

And after the things
I've heard in the past
few days, I really don't
know who I'm serving
with this act...

ILLUSIONS



...Other than Tao, of course. But his motives are always in doubt.

From the time he arrived, the day after Miss Misery and I did, we'd been sitting in a secure room concealed beneath his cabin, watching the goings-on above...

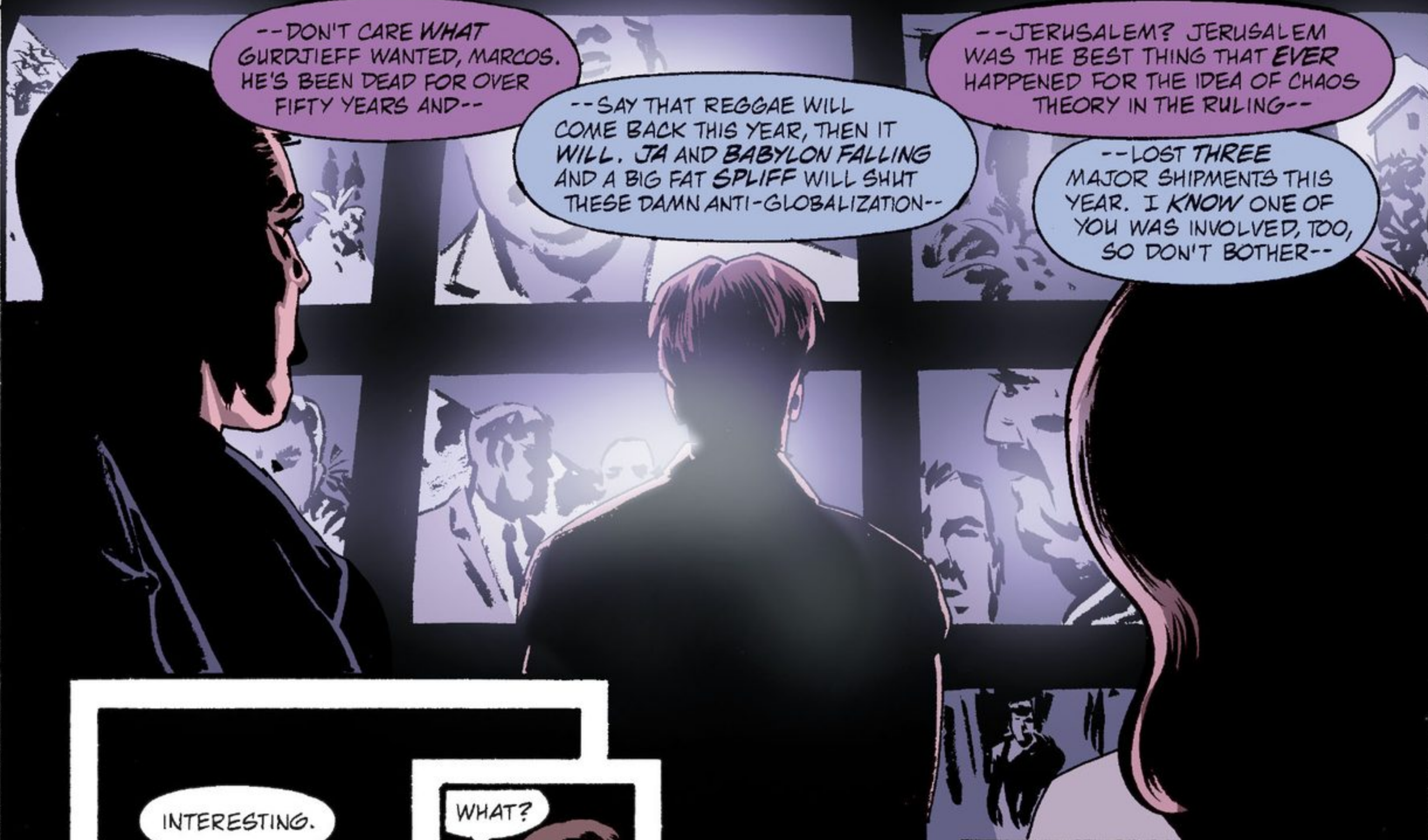


--DON'T CARE WHAT GURDJIEFF WANTED, MARCOS. HE'S BEEN DEAD FOR OVER FIFTY YEARS AND--

--SAY THAT REGGAE WILL COME BACK THIS YEAR, THEN IT WILL. JA AND BABYLON FALLING AND A BIG FAT SPLIFF WILL SHUT THESE DAMN ANTI-GLOBALIZATION--

--JERUSALEM? JERUSALEM WAS THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED FOR THE IDEA OF CHAOS THEORY IN THE RULING--

--LOST THREE MAJOR SHIPMENTS THIS YEAR. I KNOW ONE OF YOU WAS INVOLVED, TOO, SO DON'T BOTHER--



INTERESTING.

WHAT?



THEY'RE QUARRELING EVEN MORE THAN USUAL. WE'VE LAID OUR GROUNDWORK THIS PAST YEAR WELL, HOLDEN.



GROUNDWORK?
FOR WHAT?

ALL
THINGS
IN GOOD
TIME.



DOES HE EVER
JUST EXPLAIN
THINGS STRAIGHT
OUT?

ON RARE
OCCASION,
YES.



BUT YOU'LL FIND THAT
MOST OF THE TIME
HE'S TESTING YOU...

...EVEN IF IT'S
JUST A TEST OF
PATIENCE.



NOW, NOW... THAT'S A
BIT UNFAIR, MISS MISERY...

I JUST WANT OUR
NEW FRIEND HERE TO
EXPERIENCE THE **INNER
CIRCLE OF HUMANITY**
WITH AN OPEN MIND.



INNER CIRCLE, HUNH? IT SEEMS
LIKE THE WHOLE WORLD IS NOTHING
BUT ONE INNER CIRCLE WRAPPED
AROUND ANOTHER THESE DAYS.

AM I REALLY SUPPOSED
TO BELIEVE THESE PEOPLE
ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN
ANY OTHER SECRET GROUP?



ACTUALLY, **YES**. IT'S SAID THAT
MOST POWER COMES FROM BELIEF.
GOD EXISTS BECAUSE MAN BELIEVES
IN HIM.

THESE PEOPLE HERE,
THEIR POWER COMES
FROM THE FACT THAT **NO**
ONE BELIEVES IN
THEM.



NOW, I'D
SUGGEST BOTH OF YOU
GO CHANGE INTO MORE
SUITABLE ATTIRE BEFORE
THE RECEPTION TONIGHT...

I'M GOING
TO OBSERVE
THE LAST FEW
MEETINGS OF
THE DAY.





I DON'T KNOW. SEEMS LIKE A BUNCH OF SLIGHTLY *PERVERTED* STUFFED SHIRTS MORE THAN ANYTHING...

HOW DID *THEY* WIND UP HOLDING THE REINS? AND WHY ISN'T THE *FUCKING AUTHORITY* OR SOMEONE BUSTING IN HERE TO *STOP THEM*?

BUT THE SYSTEMS THAT ARE IN PLACE TO GOVERN THIS PLANET ARE *ROOTED* SO DEEPLY THAT THE HARDEST THING IN THE WORLD WOULD BE TO *CHANGE THEM*.

AND THIS SECRET SOCIETY IS IN THOSE VERY *ROOTS*.

THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS.

TO SOMEONE LIKE THE AUTHORITY THIS GROUP WOULD SEEM ABOUT AS THREATENING AS THE *BRITISH ROYALS*.

IMAGINE HUMAN EXISTENCE DIVIDED INTO *LAYERS*. ON ONE LAYER IS THE GENERAL PUBLIC--THE PEOPLE WHO *BELIEVE* WHAT THE MEDIA TELLS THEM...

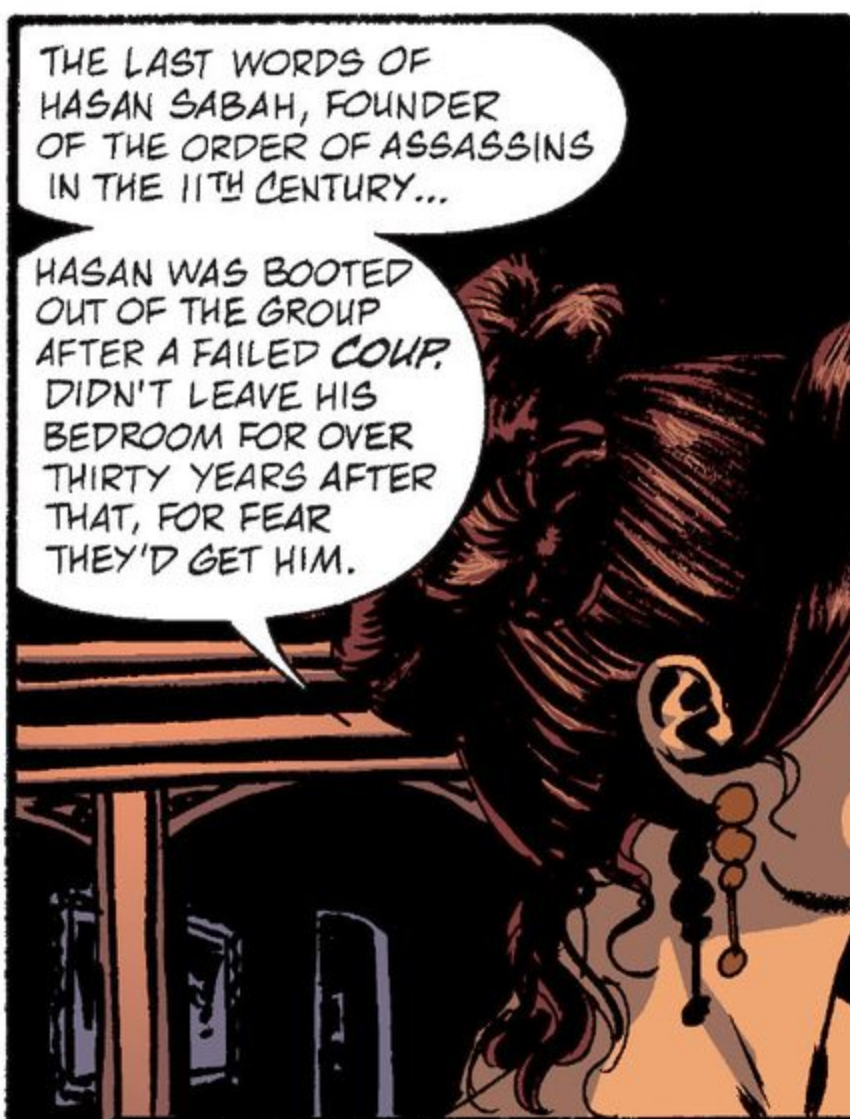
ON ANOTHER LAYER ARE POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENT AGENTS--PEOPLE WHO KNOW A LOT OF THINGS THAT THE PUBLIC DOESN'T, AND WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO COMPREHEND IF THEY DID...

AND, I MEAN, THAT'S *SIMPLIFYING IT*, REALLY, BECAUSE THERE ARE A LOT OF *LAYERS* IN BETWEEN--THE ONE THAT *CELEBRITIES* ARE ON, THE ONE THE *COPS* ARE ON...

BUT ON THAT FINAL LAYER, WHEN REALITY'S ONION HAS BEEN PEELED AWAY COMPLETELY, THERE ARE THOSE WHO WIELD THE POWER THAT THE OTHER LAYERS RUN ON.

AND *THIS* IS THAT LAYER?

IT HAS BEEN FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.



HE IS. BUT HE PREFERS TO STICK TO THE SHADOWS...

WHAT EXACTLY IS HIS CONNECTION HERE? IS HE TRYING TO JOIN UP?



NO.

TAO IS SORT OF THE MERLIN TO THIS HIGH COURT. A BEHIND-THE-SCENES ADVISOR.

YEAH, PEOPLE LIKE HIM ALWAYS SEEM TO WORK BEST OUT OF SIGHT.



BUT THIS WHOLE MEETING, IT'S PRETTY PUBLIC... AND SOME OF THESE PEOPLE ARE FAIRLY FAMOUS...

HOW DOES IT STAY SO SECRET?



A FEW YEARS AGO A REPORTER SNUCK IN HERE, ACTUALLY.

PIECED TOGETHER OLD TRAVEL RECORDS OF A FEW IMPORTANT MEN AND DISCOVERED THAT BOTH OF THEM WERE IN IMPERIAL GROVE THE SAME WEEK EACH YEAR...



"THE POOR FOOL. HE MUST'VE THOUGHT HE'D STUMBLED OVER SOME KIND OF INSIDER TRADING CONSPIRACY. PROBABLY STARTED SALIVATING FOR THE PULITZER..."



"NEVER REALIZING WHAT IT WAS HE'D ACTUALLY WALKED INTO."



"FUNNY THING, TOO, IS THAT HE MUST'VE THOUGHT HE WAS GETTING OFF PRETTY LIGHT.



"THEY QUESTIONED HIM FOR A DAY OR SO, CHECKED OUT HIS BACKGROUND...

"...AND THEN SENT HIM BACK TO THE REAL WORLD.



"EXCEPT BY THE TIME HE GOT THERE, HIS LIFE HAD BEEN ERASED.

"STRANGERS WERE LIVING IN HIS HOUSE. HIS BANK ACCOUNT AND CREDIT CARDS-- WORTHLESS.



"HE MUST'VE GONE INSANE.



"NO ONE AT HIS NEWSPAPER EVEN REMEMBERED HIM.

AND AT THAT POINT, WHY WOULD ANYONE CARE WHAT HE HAD TO SAY ABOUT ANYTHING?

JUST ANOTHER CONSPIRACY-NUT ON A STREET-CORNER, HUH?



EXACTLY... YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW MANY OF THEIR CONSPIRACIES ARE REAL.

I DOUBT MUCH WOULD SURPRISE ME THESE DAYS.



--OF COURSE NOT, DIAMANDA,
MY DEAR. YOU NEED NOT PUZZLE
OUT EVERY DETAIL. I'M WATCHING
YOUR ENEMIES CLOSELY.

I'M SURE YOU
ARE, TAO, BUT
WHO IS WATCHING
YOU?

YOU WOUND
ME. MY
INVITATION
STILL STANDS
AND YOU
KNOW IT.

JUST MAKE SURE MARCH
VOTES IN MY FAVOR
TOMORROW, DARLING, AND
WE'LL SEE ABOUT THE
REST.

AS ALWAYS,
I'M AT YOUR
SERVICE.

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MY
NEWEST PRODIGAL, HOLDEN
CARVER...THIS IS DIAMANDA
M'BATH, QUEEN OF EGYPT,
AND MONARCH OF NEARLY
ALL OF AFRICA...

IT'S AN
HONOR, YOUR
MAJESTY.

YOU'RE TRAINING THEM WELL
THIS YEAR. THE LAST ONE WAS
BARELY HOUSE-BROKEN.

NICELY DONE,
HOLDEN.

IS EVERYTHING
TAKEN CARE OF,
MISS?

YES, YOU SHOULD BE A VERY
BUSY BEE FOR THE NEXT
FEW HOURS. WHAT WOULD
YOU LIKE US TO DO NOW?

YOU'LL NEED TO GET STARTED
ON THAT OTHER THING, BUT I
WANT HOLDEN TO STAY...

YOU'LL BE FINE
ON YOUR OWN?

I'M
SURE...

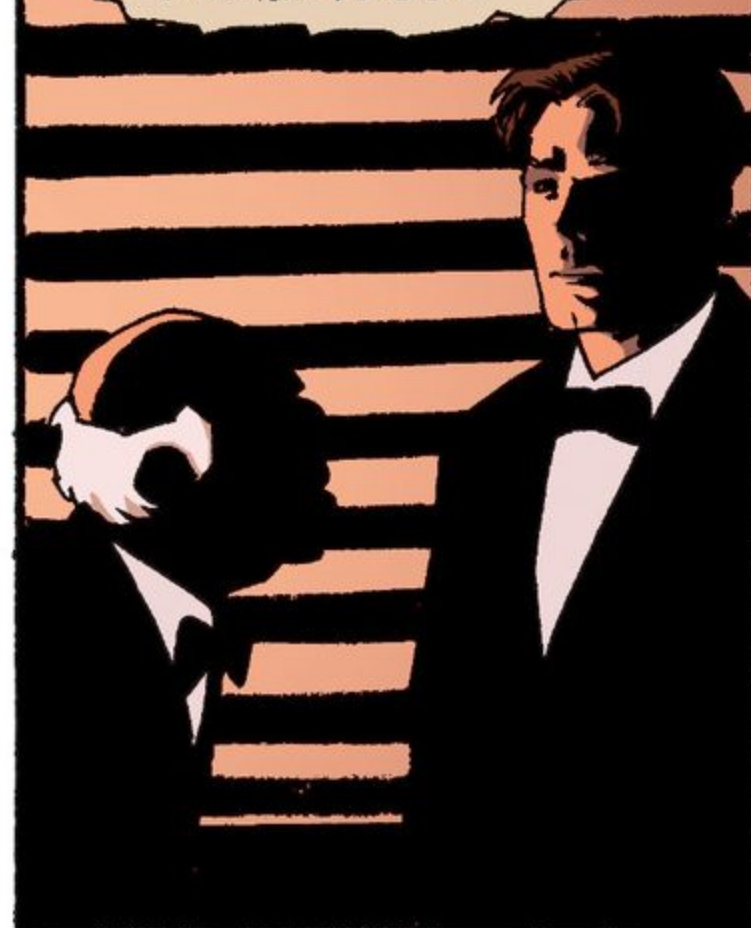
Ten minutes after Miss Misery leaves, Tao's night begins.



It's a series of quiet meetings with the major players, and honestly, most of it is over my head...



Nathaniel Oberst, from the Netherlands, talks with Tao for nearly half an hour about water engines and Thomas Edison.

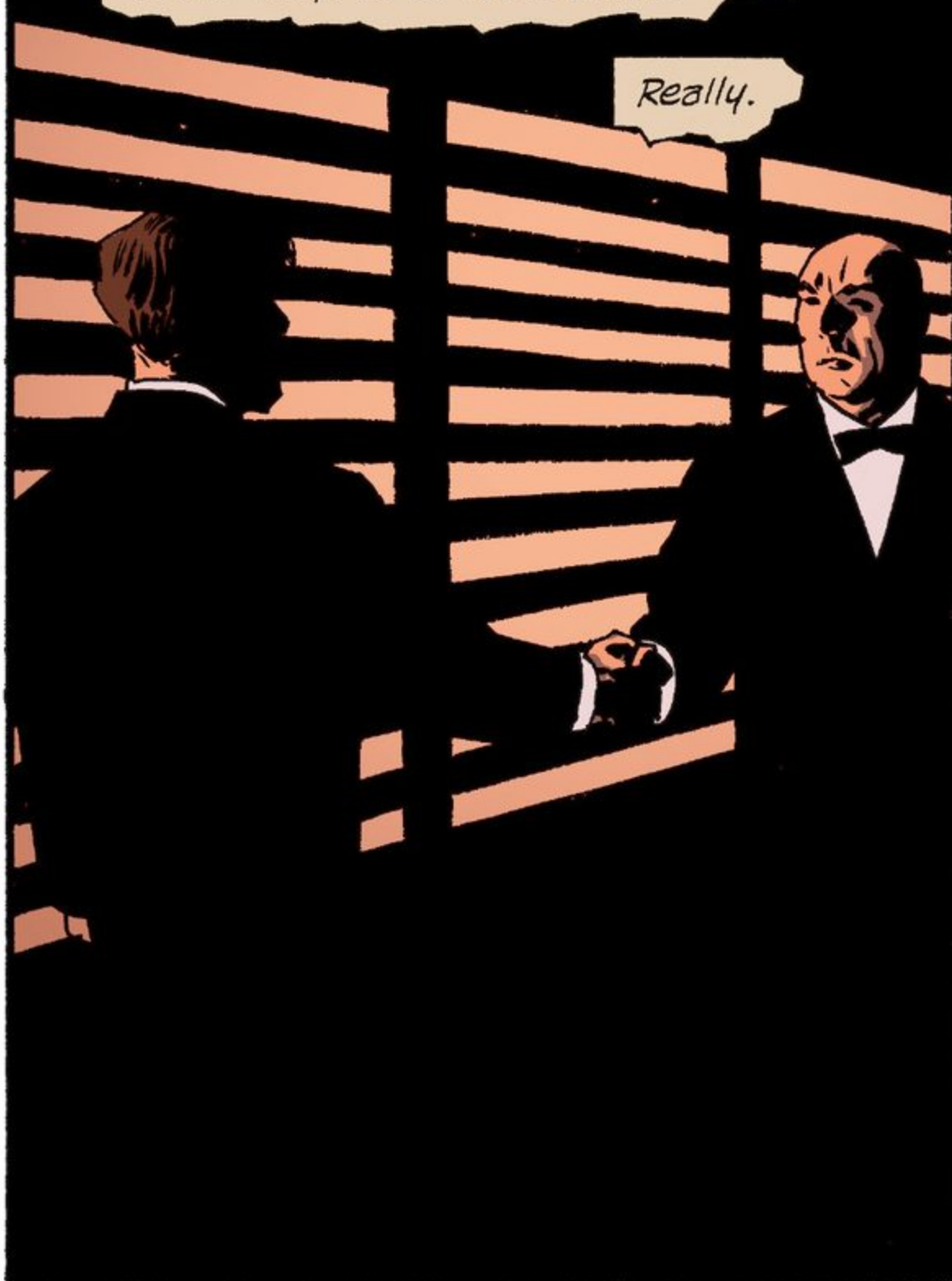


Yuri Kasokov is more animated, and clearly relies on Tao's advice and expertise, though since they speak in Russian, I only get the gist of what they're saying.



Joshua March, on the other hand, seems to resent Tao intruding on his night. They share a cold handshake and a few words about the price of tea in China.

Really.



After about five of these meetings, I zone out, my mind drawn back to Miss Misery...



...And the way she looked back at me as she left...



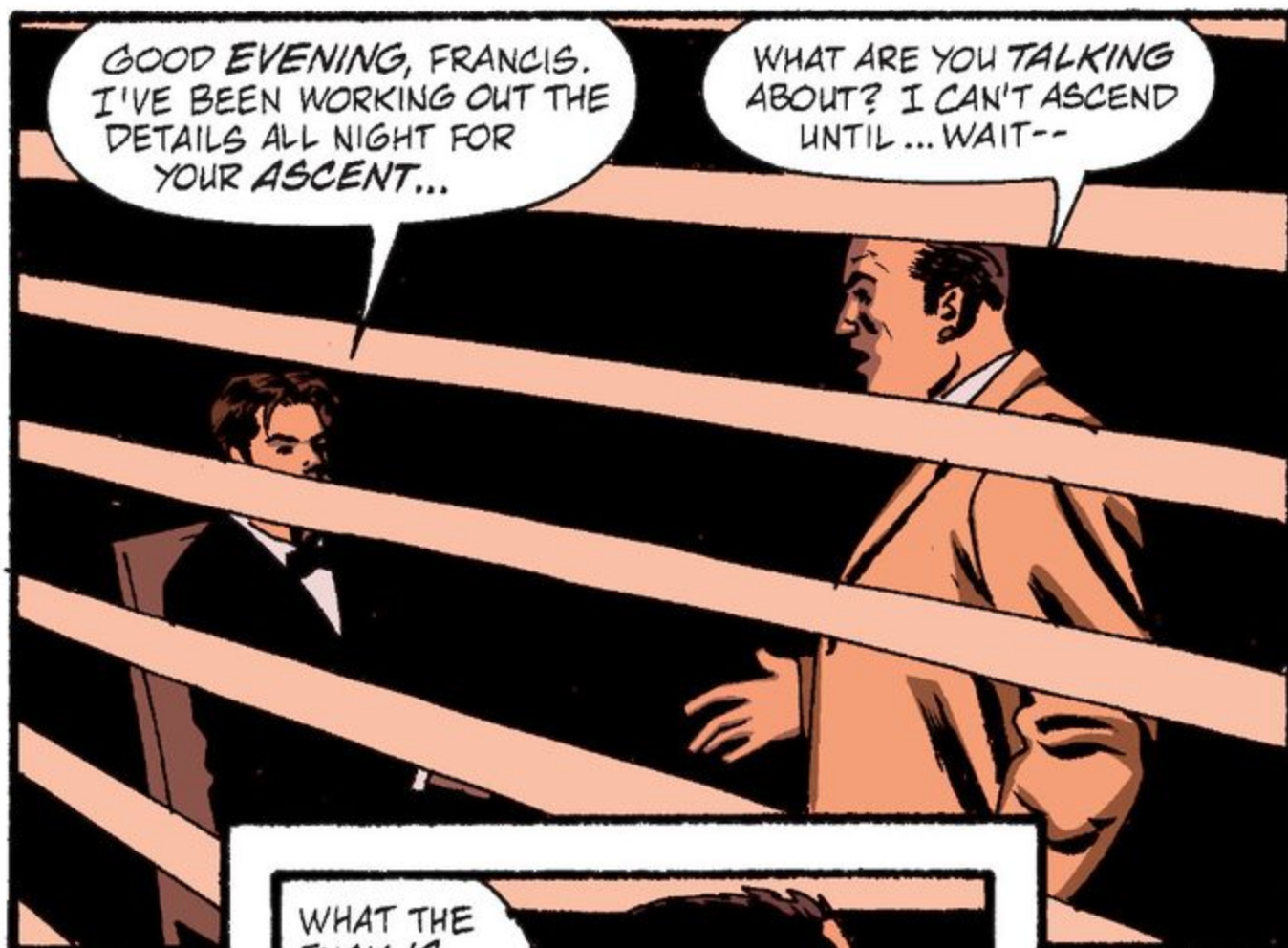
I'm pulled back into the present when Tao's last visitor arrives--Francis March, the heir apparent.

This is when Tao's real teeth come out...



GOOD EVENING, FRANCIS. I'VE BEEN WORKING OUT THE DETAILS ALL NIGHT FOR YOUR ASCENT...

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? I CAN'T ASCEND UNTIL ... WAIT--



WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS? ARE YOU TRYING TO GET ME KILLED?



NOT AT ALL.



BECAUSE IF THERE'S THE SLIGHTEST HINT THAT I'M EVEN THINKING ABOUT A MOVE ON MY FATHER, I MIGHT AS WELL EAT CYANIDE FOR BREAKFAST.



I KNOW, BUT THE SIMPLE FACT IS, YOUR FATHER IS GETTING ON IN YEARS, AND WE NEVER KNOW WHEN HE MIGHT JUST DROP ONE NIGHT.



I'M UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THIS WHOLE TOPIC, ESPECIALLY IN FRONT OF OTHERS...

...SO, JUST WHO EXACTLY IS THIS MAN?



THIS MAN? HE'S YOUR FATHER'S NATURAL HEART ATTACK.



Tao's deal with Francis March was simple...

He deactivates the penthouse security system at precisely 3:08 a.m. on his way out for a late swim...

The system will be down for approximately thirty seconds.

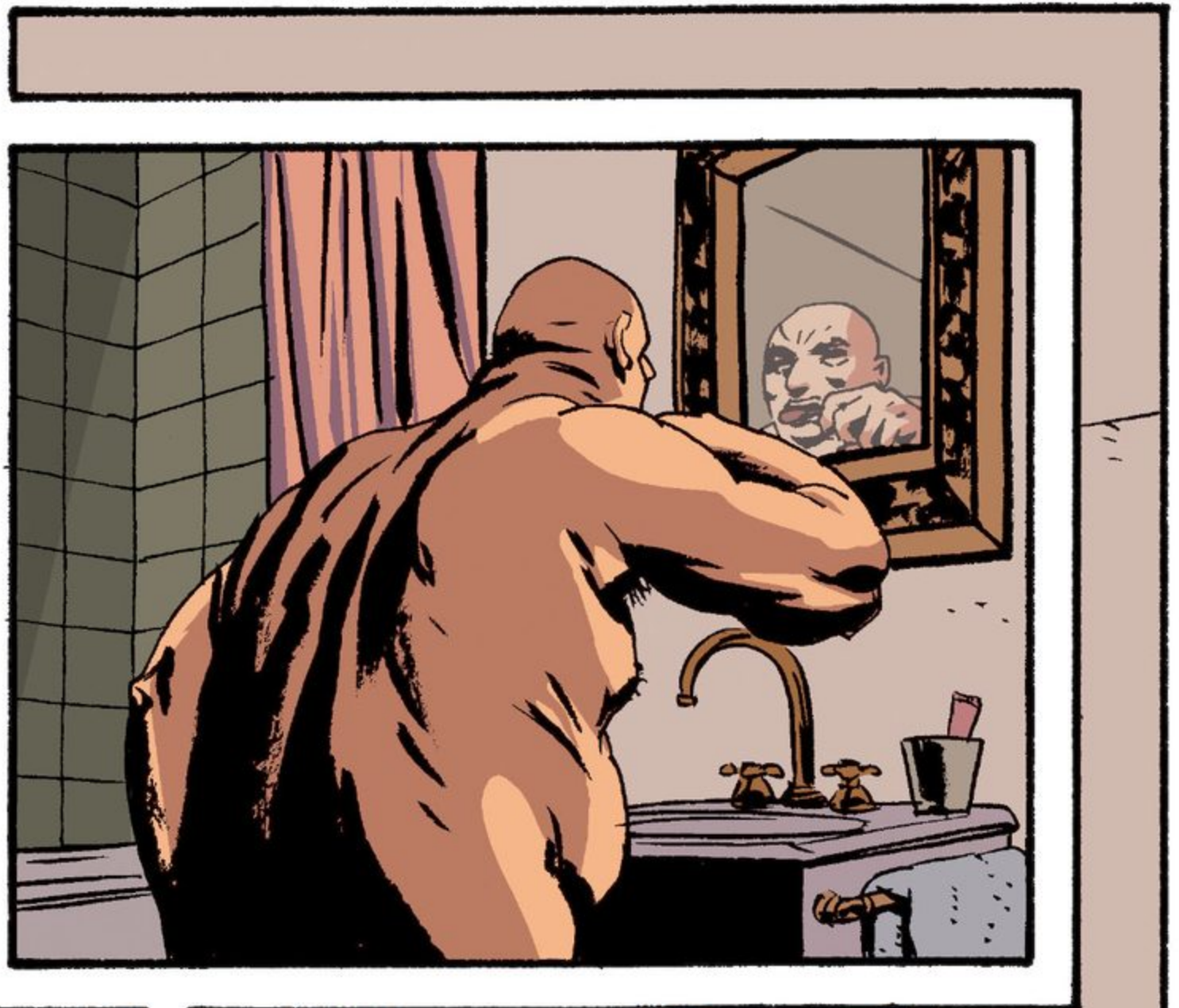
When Francis gets back, his father will be dead, and tomorrow Francis will vote the way Tao tells him.

The only problem is that no one can know what we've done.



No one
can see
me.

No one else
can get hurt or
disappear.



It turns out not
to be that hard.



UKKK--

Prolonged exposure to electrical shock.
Enough fast, intense pain to give even the
healthiest man in his 60s a major
coronary.

And thanks to me, March just gets
the pain, not the electrical burns
that go with it.



Now I just have to wait for the chaos to begin, so I can escape.



MITCH!
PRIMARY IS
DOWN!

GET A MEDICAL
UNIT IN HERE--
STAT!



As I wait, I think about the dead man in the bathroom and wonder if Lynch would have wanted him dead, too. I think so.

I think if Lynch knew about this place, he'd tell me to bring down the whole building, not just one man.



Or maybe not. Maybe he would have tried his hand at manipulating them, just like Tao is.



Maybe he'd have seen this as just another part of the game. The gods manipulating the little people.



But somehow I think he'd have been furious to find out there were gods above him, too.





For my part, I was getting pretty used to the fact that I had almost no real control over anything in my life...



HOW DID IT GO?



IT WENT FINE. HOW ABOUT YOU?

I'VE GOT SOME DOWN-TIME BEFORE I CAN FINISH MY JOB, ACTUALLY.



SO YOU THOUGHT YOU'D CHECK UP? JUST HOW LONG ARE YOU PLANNING TO KEEP TABS ON ME?



YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY THAT DENSE, ARE YOU?



WHAT?



I THINK
YOU KNOW
WHAT...

IT'S WHAT YOU'VE
WANTED EVER SINCE
YOU WATCHED ME KICK
ETCHER TO DEATH LAST
WEEK.



WAIT--
HOLD ON. I
THOUGHT YOU
AND TAO--



SOMETIMES...
SOMETIMES
NOT.

IT DOESN'T
MATTER, HOLDEN.
I DO WHAT I
WILL.



TELL
ME.

TELL ME
WHAT YOU
SAW THAT
NIGHT.



I SAW PURE EVIL.
AND JESUS
FUCKING
CHRIST, IT WAS
SO BEAUTIFUL...





DID IT MAKE
YOUR COCK
HARD?

WHY
DON'T
YOU TELL
ME?



*She gives me just enough
pain so that I can feel how
good she is. And each lash
she tears across my back
only makes her more
perfect, more desirable.*

*With each
fevered kiss, I
taste my own
blood in her
mouth.*

*Afterwards, she nearly glows, and I
remember how stunned I was by her
that night on the roof. She was right,
I had wanted her since then.*

*But why had
she come to
me?*

*Simple -- Because Tao
would kill us if he ever
found out.*

She's gone long before I wake up. Off on a secret mission of her own...



...While the results of mine take shape in the light of a new day.

A quick autopsy reveals nothing out of the ordinary, as expected, and Francis March finally takes his father's seat at the head of the table.



Not without some controversy, though, because his votes that day are wildly different than anyone had expected.

Anyone other than Tao.

With one assassination and six lies, he's turned them all against each other, and left himself with far more than plausible deniability...

YOU PROMISED ME, TAO. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS?



I'M AS APPALLED AS YOU. I HAD IT ALL WORKED OUT WITH JOSHUA MARCH LAST NIGHT...

...HOW COULD I KNOW HE'D DIE BEFORE THE FINAL VOTING?



With all the dissent and anger hovering, Francis March leaves early, just after the day's meetings draw to a close...

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY TO YOU EXACTLY, TAO.

THERE'S NO NEED FOR THANKS, I ASSURE YOU.

I'M NOT SURE I WOULD, ANYWAY. SOME OF THESE POSITIONS YOU HAD ME TAKE, I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO...

NOT TO WORRY, FRANCIS, ALL WILL BECOME CLEAR. BY NEXT YEAR'S MEETING, THE ENTIRE *WORLD* WILL BE DIFFERENT THANKS TO YOU.

YOU SHOULD START HAVING CHILDREN. YOU'LL BE NEEDING AN HEIR *YOURSELF* NOW.

SO, YOU'LL BE IN TOUCH, THEN? I'M GOING TO NEED YOUR *EAR* FROM TIME TO TIME.

AS ALWAYS, I EXIST TO SERVE.

I DON'T GET IT.

WHAT?

WHY YOU PLAYED IT THE WAY YOU DID. I THOUGHT YOU WERE SETTING THEM UP FOR YOUR OWN ADVANTAGE WITH ALL THOSE MEETINGS...

...BUT YOU JUST HAD FRANCIS UNDO ALL YOUR OWN HARD WORK. WHY?

IT'S SIMPLE, REALLY...

THERE ARE ENGINES THAT WILL RUN ON WATER, HOLDEN, AND SOME THAT WILL RUN ON SUNLIGHT...

BUT THE VAST MAJORITY OF CARS RUN ON GAS AND OIL BECAUSE PROGRESS IS INTENTIONALLY STALLED.

JOSHUA MARCH AND HIS ILK, THEY'RE LIKE AN ANCIENT MOTOR THAT THE REST OF THE WORLD WAS BUILT AROUND...

...THEY'VE BEEN TURNING IN A CIRCLE FOR SO LONG THAT IT SEEMED LIKE NOTHING COULD EVER CHANGE IT.

BUT THE WORLD THEY'D HELPED TO ENGINEER WAS SO DREADFULLY BORING, AND NOW, WITH **TWO** SIMPLE ACTS I WAS ABLE TO SHAKE THINGS UP.

WAIT A SECOND--
TWO ACTS?

YES. **YOUR** JOB LAST NIGHT...

...AND MISS MISERY'S, EARLY THIS MORNING...



ED BRUBAKER—WRITER
TONY AVIÑA for WS FX—COLORS
KRISTY QUINN—ASSISTANT EDITOR

SEAN PHILLIPS—ARTIST
KEN LOPEZ—LETTERS
SCOTT DUNBIER—EDITOR

SLEEPER CREATED by BRUBAKER and PHILLIPS